DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 752 EA 010 393

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TITLE Doubters, Delinquents and Dropouts--Can They Be Helped Through Improved Self-Concepts?
PUB DATE 11 Feb 78
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (62nd, Anaheim, California, February 17-20, 1978); For a related document, see EA 010 362; Not available in paper copy due to light print of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; *Human Relations; Improvement Programs; Positive Reinforcement; *Self Concept; *Self Esteem; *Student Improvement; *Student Problems; Teacher Influence

ABSTRACT

Since self-concept is an excellent predictor of academic success, the author argues that improvement of student self-image should be a primary goal of educators. He maintains that the successful student has a relatively high opinion of himself, while the underachiever who evinces various behavior problems suffers from a low self-opinion. The author suggests that the school principal must take the initiative and encourage school staff (bus drivers, secretaries) and teachers to first feel positive about themselves, and then to create for the students an environment of trust, caring, and openness. (Author/DS)

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EA 010 393

DOUBTERS, DELINQUENTS AND DROPOUTS - CAN THEY BE HELPED THROUGH IMPROVED SELF-CONCEPTS?

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I want to begin this morning by answering with a resounding yes to the question posed by the title of this discussion session-"Doubters, Delinquents, and Dropouts--Can They Be Helped Through Improved Self-Concepts?" I am absolutely convinced that an improved self-concept is one of the major keys to improvement in the school systems of the United States. Studies have shown that reading is a vital factor in one's self-concept and conversely a low self-concept can affect one's ability to read well. Wattenberg and Clifford suggest that self-concept is a better predictor of reading success than I.Q. Also, it has been shown that self-concept is related to over-all achievement in school, being particularly strong in boys. William Purkey, in Self-Concept and School Achievement, points out that extensive research shows that cognitive learning increases when self-concept increases. We can drill math, diagram sentences, and memorize historical dates until we are blue in the face but that child who has a low self image is not going to learn what we want him to.

Arthur Coombs has stated that "people are always motivated; in fact, they are never unmotivated. They may not be motivated to do whatever we would prefer them to do but it can never be said that they are unmotivated." Teachers deal with a variety of kids. The successful student has a relatively high opinion of himself, is optimistic about his future academic performance, confident in his general ability, works hard, liked by others. The underachiever sees himself as less adequate and less accepted by others. He is self-derogatory, has a depressed attitude toward himself, and has strong inferiority feelings. This person is not motivated in the direction we want him to go.

Adults do not naturally do those things which will help children be more positive toward themselves. So, I am suggesting that there needs to be undertaken a learning process by principals, teachers, and students in order to make self-concept an integral part of every school system, to teach people to be more positive toward themselves and others.

And that's my goal this morning, to give you an idea as to how I see this developing. What can you as principals do for yourselves, your teachers and your students? The ultimate benefactors will be the kids, and that's why we're in the business we are in, isn't it? Overnight changes are not likely. After all, it took a long time for them to get where they are, and it'll take a long time for those new attitudes to develop.

All three types of students, as I said, can be helped through an improved self-concept. There is another type, though, that can be added to that list, a type that receives more publicity today than those mentioned and one whose growth in the schools today is reaching epidemic proportions, the chemically dependent. The one whose use is turning to abuse. The one who seeks that euphoric state, that high, that he is unable to find any other way. All four of these share a common trait: a low self-concept, the inability to cope, either with themselves or external pressures.

Any drug treatment program is based on one getting in touch with himself. This ability to cope, to express one's feelings, to communicate with himself and with others, is vital to a person's outlook on life. Along with teaching math, English, etc., we can also do these things in school. A lot of it, though, must begin in the elementary school, and even before. But, there are things we can do in the secondary schools.

O.K., fellow administrator, what can you do to help this situation? Well, first of all, you can take a good look at yourself. What kind of a person are you? For, if you are going to be a leader in your school, and initiate programs and show interest in improving self-concept, then you need to take a good look at yourself, particularly if you want to lead by example. What kind of behavior are you modeling for your staff? What kind of positive reinforcements are you giving them? You've got some really great. dedicated teachers. Have you told them that? Have you told them that you're glad they are teaching in the same building you're working in? Do you give them warm fuzzies? Have you said, "I know you can do the job." Take a personal inventory. Let go, administrators--recognize your weaknesses--blow off steam--feel free to do things to help others and yourself. You must be a recovering person to help others and yourself. You are important and will have a lot to say about the success of this endeavor in your school--to raise the consciousness of the staff as it relates to self-concept. Each of us is constantly striving to maintain, protect, and enhance the self of which we are aware. We evaluate the world by how we view ourselves. How do you view yourself? There are many excellent books on the market today which can give you all kinds of personal insight. A couple that come to mind are Your Erroneous Zones, If You Really Knew Me, Would You Still Like Me?, and Passages. You, the number one person in your school, must lead by example.

What about other groups? Inservice the bus drivers, cooks, custodians, and secretaries. Who is the first school affiliated person most students see first in the morning? The bus driver. He can set the tone for the day by the way he greets kids. And you can help him to understand this. An unkind greeting to a boy who stumbles as he's getting on the bus because he can't help it

that he's a little uncoordinated as he's going through puberty or another unkind remark to a girl who stands a head taller than her male classmates and who are going to catch up to her and pass her, can be quite deflating to those two and may set the tone for the day, and not a very good one. Have you supplied your secretaries with any information on dealing with people? They may come in contact with more during the school day than you. Each person employed in the school has the potential for becoming a significant other in the life of a child. What kind of influence are they? Take a risk; talk to these people about what an effect they have on kids.

Now, what can teachers do? They hold the key to how well this process is going to work. They are going to take your's and others' ideas and put them to work. They will feel like calling on you for advice.

How can you guide your teachers? First, expose them to the idea of self-concept. Either do it yourself or bring in somebody who can do it better. There's nothing wrong with seeking outside expertise. At Lewiston, we are making use of people from colleges, drug treatment programs, a special education cooperative that we belong to, and training some staff to train others. Teachers also need to take a look at themselves. They need to feel positive about themselves. They need to explore their feelings and attitudes. They need to show kids positive feelings. A teacher or administrator cannot build positive self-concepts in students without building his own. If kids are to learn how they are to treat themselves, they need models who can help them learn by imitation. That old adage of "actions speak louder than words" holds very true here. Kids recognize what we are, where we're coming from, and where we're going.

Next, both groups, students and teachers, must create an environment of mutual support and caring. Students must sense this encouragement. Trust, caring, and openness need to be mottos of all schools; that's trust, caring, and openness. Kids need to learn how to communicate with each other, to communicate feelings. They need to discover some of the ways of improving their own and others' self-concepts. They can go through the same process you do. They can learn how to help others, to give them warm fuzzies.

Donald Pilker, in his book, Building Positive Self-Concepts, says there are five ways to a better self-concept:

1. Adults, praise yourself. This is a teaching technique because you are modeling a behavior you want them to have. Be able to tell yourself that you did a good job. Then you can help the child look at himself.
2. Help children evaluate realistically. Help them be realistic about what they can do and accurate about what they have done. If the individual is consistently evaluating himself against some unrealistic benchmark, he is bound to perceive that most of his efforts are failures.
3. Teach kids to set realistic goals. Those with low self-concepts set their goals either unrealistically low, or unrealistically high. These goals must be individual, made in relation to past performance, and they must have an end in view. This is particularly true for that doubter, delinquent, or dropout who thinks the school is not capable of meeting his needs. Try to get that person to set some realistic goals and look at himself realistically.

4. Teach children to praise themselves. The self-concept is basically internal. It is the internal perception and concept that one has of himself. It is impossible that another person can always reinforce everything desirable in a pupil. Group praise can lead to self praise. "We did well, didn't we?"
5. Teach kids to praise others, and also to receive praise. Praising others brings praise and reinforcement in return. By ignoring him when he is doing well and paying attention when he does poorly is teaching him that he says nothing good to himself when he does well, and he says negative things to himself when he does poorly. Kids need training in how to help another pupil. They need to learn how to praise others by being taught what to ignore, how to handle failure situations, and when to reinforce.

Improving the self-concept of administrators, teachers, and students isn't the only way to bring about improvement in our schools. Looking at doubters, delinquents, and dropouts specifically, they can be helped through an improved self-concept. Most emphatically, they can be helped. It's a worthwhile project to undertake. Take a risk. Try it. You have nothing to lose. Let me close by quoting Eugene Kennedy in his book, <u>If You Really Knew Me, Would You Still Like Me</u>? "How crushing it is when we fail to gain the attention of somebody we want to notice us. Is there anything harder on the human heart than being ignored by the very person whose response we desperately long for?" We can't afford to ignore the self-concept of people in our schools.